PROSPECTS
for the Military Departments

DOD (Helene C. Stikkel)

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Secretary Perry visiting Task Force Eagle.

Through the Goldwater-Nichols Act, Congress redistributed authority within the Pentagon to meet the challenges of joint warfare, which demand a greater integration of service capabilities. The accumulation of power by joint organizations over the past ten years may have led the services to feel that their influence is in free fall without any stopping point in sight. With attention heavily focused on jointness today, the role of the services is too often regarded as a secondary issue.

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Organizational Trends

Two significant trends in defense organization have emerged since 1947: the centralization of authority within OSD and the strengthening of structures responsible for joint advice, planning, and operations. Successive amendments to the National Security Act that increased the authority of the Secretary of Defense, Chairman, and combatant commanders reflect these trends. In general, these changes have had a common goal of improving the unity of effort within DOD and reducing the relative independence which the military departments had enjoyed for 170 years.

These trends have produced three major centers of power which account for nearly all DOD components: unified authority, direction, and control from the Secretary and his staff (OSD); joint military advice, planning, and integrated employment from the Chairman and joint structures; and organizing, training, and equipping administered by three military departments clustered generally around land, sea, and aerospace forces. Within this triangle, the influence of OSD and the joint structures clearly has been ascendant while that of the departments has been declining.

the assignment of forces to combatant commands also reduced the authority of service chiefs

Between 1947 and 1958, several fundamental changes in defense organization affected the military departments. These included creating a higher level National Military Establishment and Secretary over the services (1947); forming a stronger DOD, downgrading the status of services from executive (that is, Cabinet level) to military departments, and removing the service secretaries from the National Security Council (1949); and removing service secretaries and chiefs from operational chains of command (1958). As one scholar noted in the early 1960s: ". . . the services are being dismembered and disemboweled, their utility is decided continually in decrements . . . the only relevant question being whether the process is too fast or too slow."[1]

In general, these changes reduced the role of the service secretaries as independent civilian policymakers and created patterns of interaction whereby service staffs sometimes worked directly with OSD, thus bypassing service secretariats. At the same time, changes in the chain of command and the assignment of forces to combatant commands also reduced the authority of service chiefs, though their influence in joint matters remained strong. These losses of authority changed working relationships within DOD in many ways, sometimes causing friction between civilian and military leaders in the services, yet also bringing them closer together to protect the remnants of service autonomy.[2]

Outside commissions and reports provided conflicting opinions on the military departments. The Symington Committee (1960) recommended the strong *centralization* of management under OSD and the elimination of service secretaries and their staffs. The Blue Ribbon Defense Panel (1970) advised *decentralization* and a reduction in the duplication of effort among OSD, service secretariat, and service staffs. The Ignatius Report (1978) sought a stronger role for service secretaries, recommending their greater use in defense-wide tasks. It also promoted further reduction of the duplication in service headquarters and "common access" by the service secretaries and chiefs to analytical and oversight functions.

Though such recommendations produced some minor adjustments in responsibilities within the military departments after 1958, the next major crossroads for statutory change came with the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.

Impact of Goldwater-Nichols

The DOD reorganization of 1986 had direct and indirect effects on the military departments. The latter included changes which did not directly affect the services but increased the authority and responsibilities of organizations above them. They reinforced broad trends, such as strengthening the roles of the Secretary, Chairman, and CINCs.

The provisions which fortified these key players indirectly reduced the influence of service secretaries and chiefs. With the Chairman clearly identified as the principal military adviser and in control of the Joint Staff, individual chiefs would be less capable of wielding an informal service veto over collective JCS positions. CINCs were given more peacetime authority over component commands. A new unified command, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), was given "head of agency" authorities, including budgeting and procurement responsibilities, which made it unique among combatant commands and akin to a military department. Strengthening the authority of the Secretary over all DOD activities further emphasized that service secretaries function under his authority, direction, and control.

USS Paul Hamilton undergoing sea trials.

Bath Iron Works

In its direct effects, Goldwater-Nichols made several changes to military departments that had mixed results. One of the more important was to provide uniformity in the statute, prescribing the responsibilities of service secretaries to the Secretary of Defense and ensuring that secretaries and chiefs have the same basic responsibilities and reporting relationships within each service. The act also attempted to reduce duplication between service secretariats and service staffs by separating civilian and military functions and by assigning certain "sole responsibilities" to the Secretary. In this regard Goldwater-Nichols has only partially succeeded. The potential integration of service secretariats and staffs was the underlying issue and a major sticking point. The House bill favored integration while the Senate was opposed to it. Finally, the conferees

M–1 tank on trail in Bosnia.

55th Signal Company / Combat Camera (Nicholas J. Blair)

determined that service secretariats and staffs should be separately organized but expressed continuing concern over this duplication which survived in the compromise language.[3]

Structural tensions in military department headquarters remain and are subject to even more scrutiny today with pressure to downsize staffs and reduce duplication. The Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces (CORM) found that having two staffs in the same headquarters (three in the case of the Department of the Navy) impedes integration of effort and causes friction in the headquarters as well as at higher and lower echelons. The commission concluded: "Military department secretaries and chiefs would be better served by a single staff of experienced civilians and uniformed officers" (with some accommodation to the Navy's special circumstances). No significant progress has been made on this highly contentious proposal. This issue is further burdened by the need for statutory relief in certain areas before closer integration and consolidation can be attained.

In sum, Goldwater-Nichols was less concerned with reforming military departments than strengthening joint components. Further reforms envisioned in the original House bill and Senate staff report were lost in the compromise. In attempting to rationalize civilian and military functions in service headquarters, Goldwater-Nichols probably raised as many questions as it answered.

Future Possibilities

Goldwater-Nichols clearly left unfinished business in its treatment of military departments, and the points outlined above are good candidates for review. The basic role of service secretaries is also a perennial issue, and missions and functions across the military departments certainly need to be addressed. Here, the higher level issue of the role of military departments within the defense establishment is the focus.

the role of the military departments depends upon how the Secretary of Defense exercises civilian control

Among the corners of the organizational triangle described earlier, changes since Goldwater-Nichols have continued the erosion of service influence. The equipping function, of course, has evolved in ways that leave military departments largely as initiators, managers, and administrators of procurement programs whose content—increasingly seen from a joint perspective—is decided in greater degree and detail by OSD (namely, by the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology), with the advice of joint structures. Implementation of the Defense Management Review of 1989, creation of new defense agencies or expansion of existing ones, and introduction of new accounting practices—associated with the Defense Business Operations Fund—also pulled responsibilities for administration, support, and infrastructure away from the military departments and toward OSD.

Some functions migrating from the services have also moved toward joint structures. Examples include establishing SOCOM and assigning the mission of joint force integration to U.S. Atlantic Command. Other changes, such as assignment of *peacetime* resource management responsibilities to U.S. Transportation Command, are less visible but no less important.

If this trend continues, it is possible to envision parts of even more support responsibilities (such as medical, maintenance, and logistics) shifting toward OSD and defense agencies, and some related to force development (such as certain types of planning, programming, and training) moving to joint structures. Such changes would impact on both major command activities and the Washington headquarters of the military departments. If realized, they would further diminish the control of service headquarters over policies, personnel, installations, and resource allocation, thus ultimately raising a fundamental question about the need for military departments.

Limiting Erosion

How far might service responsibilities erode? Is it possible to describe clear organizational dividing lines? Paradoxically, defining the future role of OSD is key to answering these questions. The role of the military departments, especially their headquarters, basically depends upon how the Secretary of Defense perceives and exercises civilian control, how and to what extent he delegates authority to lesser OSD officials, and how far he goes in creating defense-wide activities. The

Marines securing perimeter during CJTFEX '96.

II MEF Combat Camera (A. Olguin)

question is not how narrow service responsibilities may become, but rather how broad the role of the OSD staff should be. And here there are probably practical limits.

Unbounded growth in OSD could eventually be recognized as detrimental for two reasons. First, the increasing tendency to move from program oversight to hands-on resource management highlights the limitations of headquarters staffs as operating agents. Responsibility for resource management tends to turn advisers into advocates. Second, the functional orientation and growth of the OSD staff, reinforced by consolidation of defense agencies, have the effect of stovepiping or "balkanizing" management which then makes it more difficult for the Secretary to provide unified direction to DOD. Eventually, the deeply entrenched structure of decentralized technical services and bureaus which plagued the War and Navy Departments prior to World War II could reemerge, this time led by under and assistant secretaries of defense.[4]

The CORM report and FY96 DOD Authorization Act (section 901) highlighted the need to review the role of the OSD staff. Beyond acting as the immediate staff of the Secretary of Defense, its broader role is not addressed adequately by statute or in DOD Directive 5100.1 which outlines major organizational functions. While retaining the flexibility to organize and operate DOD headquarters as the Secretary sees fit, further definition is necessary to articulate (among other things) responsibilities of civilian and military staffs supporting the Secretary and how duties for the administration of DOD support and infrastructure activities should be divided. Sorting out the future role of OSD is therefore central to various pending management issues and crucial for the military departments.[5]

Absorbing major portions of military departments into the joint system also has drawbacks. Responsibilities of the Chairman and joint components focus on joint military advice, warfighting, and joint force development and integration. Because these tasks are complicated enough, adding the duties of organizing, training, equipping, maintaining, and supporting the entire Armed Forces would overwhelm the existing joint system and change its nature. The span of control is arguably too broad. In addition, service training, education, infrastructure, and support systems—although overlapping and in need of better coordination in some areas—are sufficiently large and dissimilar to justify separate administration. So it is not obvious that major efficiencies would result from placing them under a single joint management umbrella.

Military Departments as Integrators

Practical limits on the ability of OSD and joint structures to absorb all service functions may define an enduring place for military departments by default. Moreover, it is not clear that better ways to organize, train, and equip forces can be developed. Would it be preferable to recruit and organize forces around functional specialties or agencies? Probably not. Around geographic or functional combatant commands? Again, the answer is no.

But is there a more positive rationale with which to affirm the role of military departments? The answer here is yes. From a detached perspective, the world of eleven assistant secretaries supervising sixteen defense agencies (plus field activities), and the Chairman's oversight of nine combatant commands, only accentuates the fact that the military departments are major integrating elements within the DOD organizational structure. That is, they internally balance and integrate combat and support and operations and investment perspectives. They compose differences, make tradeoffs, and execute decisions within a strong administrative chain of command. This argument, of course, potentially leads to four separate service paths on any given issue and does not eliminate the need for defense-wide guidance from OSD and the joint structures. It nevertheless shows that military departments, despite "narrow" service perspectives, still have a broad view when it comes to balancing effectiveness and efficiency across a range of defense activities.

It may be that particular functions are accomplished better or more efficiently if centralized in OSD or the joint system. Certainly this has been a leading rationale for the ongoing migration of support responsibilities away from the services. But this criterion is suboptimizing the overall structure of DOD. Each time a decision is made to consolidate three support activities, the span of control for the Secretary or Chairman increases (sixteen defense agencies and nine combatant commands and counting), the synergism between combat and support activities


C–141s at Rhein-Main during Peace Shield '95.

U.S. Air Force (Greg Suhay)

is weakened, responsibilities are split, and organizational roles and functions are blurred. This undervalues the overall advantage to DOD of having three military departments provide the majority of management and administration for defense resources.

To be clear, the issue is not the "power and influence" of military departments versus other DOD components since all power resides with the Secretary of Defense unless Congress prescribes otherwise. And it is certainly not an issue of "traditional title 10 responsibilities," since most DOD components have at least some of their responsibilities outlined in that title. Given the tension and ambiguities of title 10 and latitude afforded the Secretary to manage DOD, the issue is arriving at a clear understanding of the roles and functions of all components *in relation to each other.*

Goldwater-Nichols was intended to build up joint structures, not eliminate the military departments

The expertise and core competencies of military departments are in professional knowledge of their respective warfighting environments, integration of combat and support activities, balanced resource allocation that includes near- and long-term perspectives, and the day-to-day management and administration of complex, large-scale peacetime activities. DOD needs military departments to fulfill basic missions. It needs the professional expertise of individual services to provide building blocks for joint military capability; and it needs balanced management perspectives (long and short-term, combat and support, et al.) to assist the Secretary in efficient administration.

Goldwater-Nichols was intended to build up joint structures too long dominated by service interests, but it was not meant to eliminate the role of the military departments. It may be time for the pendulum to swing back toward recognizing the importance of the departments—not to undo what has been accomplished or diminish the ongoing commitment to jointness, but rather to ensure that jointness is grounded on a firm foundation of service force providers. This argues for revalidating and reinforcing the role of the military departments as primary line managers of defense resources and a preference for strong, effective service secretaries and chiefs.

Even within current budgetary and operational climates focused on greater efficiency and jointness, it remains important that the Secretary limits the responsibilities assigned to OSD and the joint structures, reaffirms the essential role of the military departments, and takes advantage of the fact that they are likely to remain a large and enduring feature of defense organization.

Civilian and military leaders within each department must also do their part to engage with OSD and joint structures in ways perceived to be constructive and oriented toward solving defense-wide problems. The line between acceptable and welcomed service advocacy and the "turnoff" of service parochialism can be fine. If the services fail to distinguish between the two, they may only encourage previous trends and further devalue their future role. However, with enlightened leadership, and if the role of military departments is not over or undersold, then the services may yet confirm their important role in a well balanced defense organization whose constructive tensions will yield joint operational effectiveness and efficiency. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Paul T. Hammond, *Organizing for Defense: The American Military Establishment in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 374.

[2] See U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Defense Organization: The Need for Change*, committee print, staff report 99–86, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, chapter 6; and George Watson, Jr., *The Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, 1947–1965* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1993), chapter 7.

[3] U.S. Congress, House, *Conference Report, Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986*, House report 99–824, 99th Cong., 2d sess., 1986, pp. 144–55.

[4] See James E. Hewes, *From Root to McNamara: Army Organization and Administration, 1900–1963* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1975); also Hammond, *Organizing for Defense*, pp. 49–63.

[5] Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces, *Directions for Defense: Report of the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces* (Arlington, Va.: 1995), pp. 4–21.